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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006739

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION REJECTS COMPROMISE PACKAGE BUT TALKS
CONTINUE

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

11. (C) Summary. Opposition leaders dismissed a compromise package and vowed to press on with their nationwide blockade program, but talks continue to break the logjam. The blockade is not being vigorously enforced, but inter-city transportation arteries are blocked, and some officials fear a prolonged blockade could produce a new crisis quite soon. End Summary.

The Offer

12. (SBU) After a marathon six-hour meeting yesterday with Chief Adviser Ahmed, a delegation of three Caretaker Government advisers met with the leaders of the two major political alliances to present a new compromise package that would:

- Make "inactive" Election Commissioners S.M. Zakaria and Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury, an apparent middle ground between "leave" and resignation.
- The appointment of new election commissioners. (According to one insider, the actual number would be "two.")
- The replacement of the home and establishment secretaries, and others related to the electoral process.
- Modification of the election schedule to facilitate correction of the voter list, with the polling date remaining January 21.

The Reaction

13. (SBU) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its partners welcomed the proposal while underscoring their main concern that the election date not slip beyond the constitutionally-mandated 90-day time limit for the Caretaker Government.

14. (SBU) However, Awami League leaders, publicly and privately rejected the proposal as inadequate and reiterated their demands for cancellation of the election schedule, a new voter list, a complete purge of the Election Commission, more personnel transfers. and a new chief adviser. Party Secretary General Abdul Jalil vowed that the renewed

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nationwide transportation blockade would continue until these demands are met.

15. (C) During a meeting today with visiting SCA DAS John Gastright (septel), Caretaker Government Adviser Ali Akbar Khan lamented that, even if agreement were reached today on a

deal, the country is fast running out of time. "These issues should have been dealt with one month ago," a dejected Khan remarked.

¶16. (C) Several senior officials linked to the former ruling party have speculated to us that a prolonged blockade could force the government to call in the army under a state of emergency, although the latest indications are that army leaders have taken to heart warnings from a visiting UN official that army intervention could jeopardize international peacekeeping opportunities -- a particular concern of mid-level officers.

¶17. (C) The Awami League's bottom line, senior leaders told Ambassador over the weekend, is: resignation of Election Commissioner Zakaria and the "vacationing" Chief Election Commissioner Aziz; the appointment by the president in consultation with Caretaker Government advisers of four new commissioners, including a new chief election commissioner; the replacement of 300 local officials involved with elections; revision of the voter list in line with court ruling for a new list; and changes in the election schedule. They confirmed that while they would continue to raise the demand publicly, they would accept Ahmed's continuation as chief adviser, and that the blockade would again be suspended if opposition demands were "considered."

The Situation Today

¶18. (SBU) As talks with the two parties continue, the renewed nationwide transportation blockade is in its second day. Traffic volumes in Dhaka are up, as the blockade is not being vigorously enforced, especially between 1700 and 0900, but people and goods are not moving between cities. At 1500, local media reported that the acting chief election commissioner has been summoned to the presidency.

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Comment

¶19. (C) The Awami League's bottom line has shifted too often to be clear, but the Bangladesh Nationalist Party seems to have dug in its heels over the polling date, insisting it must be before the Caretaker Government's 90-day clock expires. As a practical logistical matter, we are nearing the point in mid-December where the Awami League's demands and a timely election will be mutually exclusive.
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